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Literature, materiality, technology: Australian literary journals as ‘assemblages of works’

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Research background

- A 'work as assemblage': 'a cluster of related texts that quote, comment upon, amplify, and otherwise intermediate one another' (Hayles, 2005)
- The text itself is called into question, and 'the specificities of media' become 'essential to understanding its morphing configurations' (Hayles, 2005).

Research questions

- How do print and digital work together to construct the literary journal as a 'work as assemblage'?
- What is the role of print, and is this changing?

About literary journals

Definition:

A small periodical in print, on the web, or across multiple platforms that publishes a miscellany of writing forms from both Australian and international writers. This material generally includes short fiction, essays, creative non-fiction, reviews, poetry, and interviews, and can include multimedia content such as podcasts and recordings.

Theoretical framework

- Cultural studies framework
- Drawing on Marxist perspectives
- Pierre Bourdieu's notions of 'habitus' and the literary 'field'
- New media theory – Marshall McLuhan, Henry Jenkins, Bolter and Grusin, and particularly Katherine Hayles
- Walter Benjamin's 'aura'.

Methodology

Methods

- Mapping
- **Semi-structured interviews**
- Textual analysis of literary journals.

Interviews

- Semi-structured interviews
- 11 journals, 9 editors
- 3 print-only, 5 'multi-platform', 3 web-only
- Representative sample ranging across spectrum of Australian literary journals.

Participating editors and journals

Journal	Editor	Publication medium
<i>Cordite</i>	Kent MacCarter	Online
<i>Going Down Swinging</i>	Geoff Lemon	Multi-platform
<i>HEAT</i>	Ivor Indyk	Print (folded)
<i>Island</i>	Matthew Lamb	Print
<i>Overland</i>	Jacinda Woodhead	Multi-platform
<i>Review of Australian Fiction</i>	Matthew Lamb	Online
<i>Southerly</i>	David Brooks	Multi-platform
<i>Stilts</i>	Bronte Coates	Multi-platform
<i>Sydney Review of Books</i>	Ivor Indyk	Online
<i>The Canary Press</i>	Robert Skinner	Print
<i>The Lifted Brow</i>	Sam Cooney	Multi-platform

Surprising findings

- Assumed that online publication would suit journals' nature as miscellanies, reach more readers, and solve some financial problems
- While print and digital worked together, valued differently
- Choice of digital vs print has drawn attention to or enhanced some of the qualities of print
- A hidden dialogic of value?

Economics of print and digital publishing

- Print a more 'workable business model'
- Difficult to sell immaterial digital content
- People 'expect internet to be free'
- 'Why would you bother buying access to a digital edition of a magazine, when you *don't even really understand what it is?*'
- Is something definitive lost online?

Materiality and literary value

- Benjamin's 'aura' of the original work of art in mechanical age could be transposed to the analogue work in digital age
- New material literacy of print, where books are art objects and are treated as such
- Print, paradoxically, most popular with younger editors
- Different forms suited to different media, with fiction best suited to print
- Material qualities of a text influence readers' mood and engagement

Further research

- Literary journals as cultural archive – how to best conserve this in different media?
- Editors – a skewed sample?
- Who do literary journals serve and how does this affect media choice?
- Funding – how to assess journals' success, serve writers and readers, maintain quality and independence?

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